

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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B A L D  
Eagles

IN WASHINGTON





Since 1782, the bald eagle has been America's national symbol. For a hundred years of that time, the birds also held the classification of *vermin* on the eradication lists of every state! During that period, there was no place of refuge for bald eagle populations—they were killed throughout the United States and in every Canadian province. It was not until passage of the Bald Eagle Protection Act in 1940 (now the Eagle Protection Act) that legal protection for the eagle began.

Bald eagle populations have now dwindled to threateningly low numbers. From the hundreds of thousands that soared through the skies in the days of our forefathers, fewer than 5,000 now nest in the lower 48 states. Where they once were plentiful, they now hold the status of "endangered" in 43 of these states, and "threatened" in the remaining five (including Washington).

Today, the biggest single threat to bald eagles is loss of habitat. The eagle's feeding requirements place them in lowlands and shoreline areas which likewise are the preferred locations for human activities. As the pressures of development have increased, bald eagle living space has declined. The conflict of interests is leaving the eagle the loser.

## STATUS

Washington's marine coastlines and lowland river basins provide rich habitat for the bald eagle. Good habitat, and the relative abundance of bald eagles it supports, offers us the opportunity to frequently view this rare animal.

With 248 pairs during 1986, Washington's nesting population ranks with Florida, Wisconsin, and Minnesota as the largest in the contiguous states. During winter, migrant eagles arrive from distant localities, such as Canada and Alaska. January counts are often more than triple the breeding season counts. During January, Washington has consistently reported more bald eagles than any of the other 48 contiguous states.

There are many reasons to be concerned for Washington's eagle population. Nesting eagles along the lower Columbia River and Hood Canal are not reproducing at anywhere near the normal rate. Wintering eagles may be suffering from increasing recreational uses of the rivers that provide their winter food source. Overfishing sometimes can make a river system unsuitable for eagles for an entire winter season. Night roosts, now numbering 47 in Washington, are often located in valuable timber.

*The bald eagle's distinctive white head and tail do not appear until the bird is about five years old. Its first four years are spent in brown plumage from head to tail. Juveniles are often confused with golden eagles.*

## NESTING

For a nest support, bald eagles invariably choose a tree that towers above all surrounding trees. Douglas fir and Sitka spruce trees within 300 yards of open water are typical nest trees. Along rivers, black cottonwoods frequently are used. The nest will often be well-concealed in the foliage of the top 10 or 20 feet of the tree. Islands and points of land along the saltwater shoreline support the majority of Washington bald eagle nests.

Bald eagles that have nested in an area for a number of years will often have more than one nest. They may alternate nests from one season to the next or they may choose to use the same nest repeatedly. Nests that go unused for many years can be reoccupied at any time.

Bald eagles are extremely sensitive to disturbance during the early part of the nesting cycle. This includes the nest-building period, the period of incubation of eggs, and the first five weeks of nestling life.

In Washington, most nest-building activity occurs in January and February. Egg-laying occurs in March or early April. One to four eggs are laid, usually just one or two. After a 35-day incubation period, eaglets will hatch in mid-April or early May. After 10 to



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TONY STEFFER, NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

12 weeks, the eaglets will take their first clumsy flights. Eaglets usually leave the nest in mid-July, often remaining in the vicinity for an additional month. This idealized series of events does not fit every situation. Bald eagles, like humans, are highly variable in their behavior and development.

A bald eagle's first four years are spent in brown plumage from head to tail. Although white mottling is present at some stages, the distinctive white head and tail do not appear until the fifth year.

Their food habits are extremely varied. Small prey, such as herring, are taken when abundant. However, larger fish, water birds, and small mammals also are taken as live prey. One nest in the San Juan Islands contained the carcasses of more than 30 gulls! During winter, carrion, such as carcasses discarded by trappers, winter-kill deer, and spawned-out salmon also attract eagles.

## COMMUNAL WINTER ROOSTS

Migrant eagles begin to appear on traditional wintering grounds during late October. Peak numbers occur during January and February. The primary motivations during winter are feeding and conserving energy. Bald eagles congregate near sources of food, generally rivers, lakes and the marine shoreline. When not actively feeding or searching for food, they will appear to "loaf" in favorite perch trees.

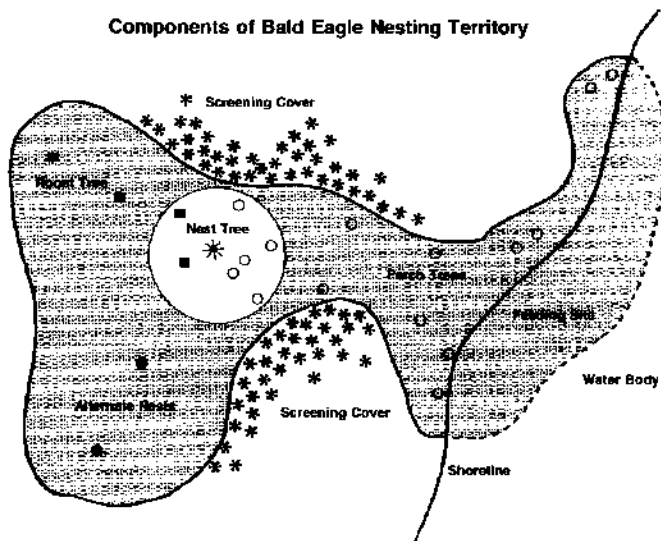
As dusk approaches, eagles seek out night roosts—perching sites where the birds spend the night. They provide physical protection during the winter as well as serving various social functions. Stands selected for roosting are usually made up of mature trees with strong limbs high above the ground and well-developed canopies. They are often on slopes that face away from the prevailing winds. Perched on limbs close to the trunks of the tall roost trees, bald eagles are shielded from the chill of wind and rain. These lofty perches also provide views of the surroundings and any approaching danger.

Bald eagles appear to openly encourage large gatherings at communal night roosts. Staging areas, stands of trees located between the feeding grounds and the roost, are used to attract attention to the roost. Eagles gather in



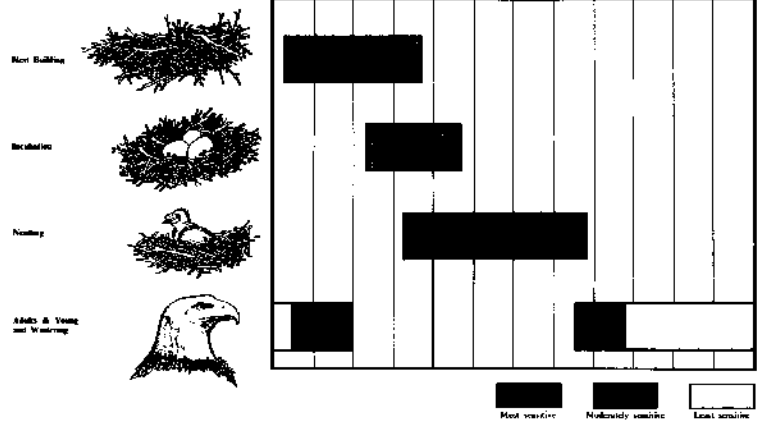
ILLUSTRATION BY J. L. NIELSEN

Components of Bald Eagle Nesting Territory



*Bald eagles that have nested in an area for a number of years often will have more than one nest, which may be used alternately in different nesting years. They nest close to a food source, where there is enough screening vegetation for safety.*

BALD EAGLE NESTING AND WINTERING CYCLE - WASHINGTON STATE



(right) Bald eagles are extremely sensitive to disturbance during the early part of the nesting cycle. This includes the nest-building period, the period of incubation of eggs and the first five weeks of nestling life. Winter is a stressful time, when the eagles' primary tasks are to feed and to conserve energy.

(below) These young eagles will not be ready to take their first clumsy flights until they are 10 to 12 weeks old when they leave the nest. They may remain in the vicinity of the nest for an additional month or so.





CRAIG KOPPEL, NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION



the staging areas prior to flying into the night roost. To further advertise the roost's location, eagles will soar above it or perch in the tops of roost trees screeching loudly. Scientists believe that roosts are one of the places where bald eagles communicate food locations. Pair formation and bonding also may occur here.

## MANAGING BALD EAGLE HABITAT

In 1973, the Endangered Species Act provided the legal foundation for efforts to protect declining species. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—the federal agency charged with managing threatened and endangered species—recently released the Pacific States Bald Eagle Recovery Plan, which outlines steps for bald eagle management and habitat protection on federal lands.

Eagles utilize the habitat areas located on state and private lands as well. To assure that these areas will remain available for eagle habitation requires the understanding and the participation of citizens and landowners.

*Eagles commonly gather in staging areas before flying to the winter night roost.*



AITKENHEAD

Responsibility for saving the bald eagle from extinction rests with each of us.

Federal and state laws require that bald eagle nesting and roosting habitats be managed to maintain and increase eagle numbers to the point of "recovery." Recovery is that threshold where eagle populations remain self-sustaining and can be removed from threatened or endangered status. Using these recovery standards, new state regulations for habitat management have been adopted. Washington landowners are now requested to report any bald eagle activity on their land to the Department of Game. According to the regulations, site-specific habitat management plans will then be designed to meet the needs of both eagles and landowners.



***Eagles commonly gather in staging areas before flying to the winter night roost.***



AITKENHEAD

ROGER AND DONNA ATKENHEAD



(below) Islands and points of land along the saltwater shoreline support the majority of Washington bald eagle nests.

(bottom) Site-management plans are individually designed to fit specific characteristics of the site. The plans are flexible and can be re-evaluated and adjusted.

## Developing

### A Site-Management Plan

When land management activities are proposed near a verified nest site, the landowner, the Department of Game, and the permitting agency meet on the site. Collectively, with mutual regard for the birds and the landowner's desires, site plans will then be made. The extent, location and timing of any planned activity will be considered with regard to the timing and use of the area by the eagles. Various in-

centives will be considered to help offset any burden which the landowner may incur. Working cooperatively, all options will be explored to provide the landowner with satisfactory alternatives for the use of the property.

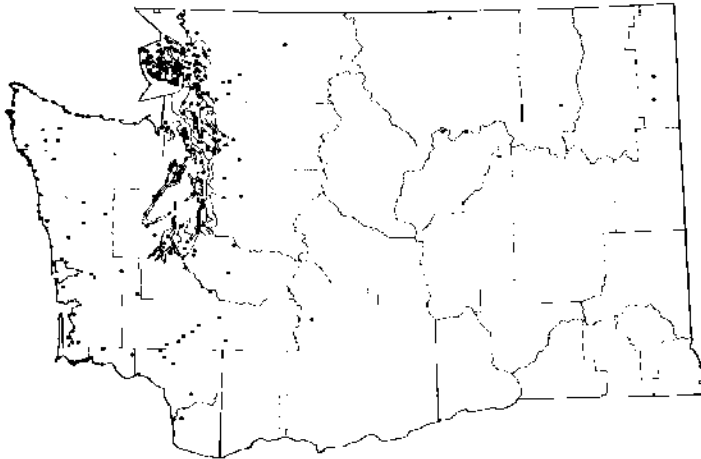
The history of bird use in the area provides the initial guidance for development of management plans. Where and when do the birds feed, perch, nest or roost? What has been their nesting productivity? How long have we known of the birds using the area?

Other questions include: What is the current land use in the vicinity and what has happened since the birds were first known to occur there? Who are the landowners and what are their desires and abilities for the management of these areas? Where would they like assistance?

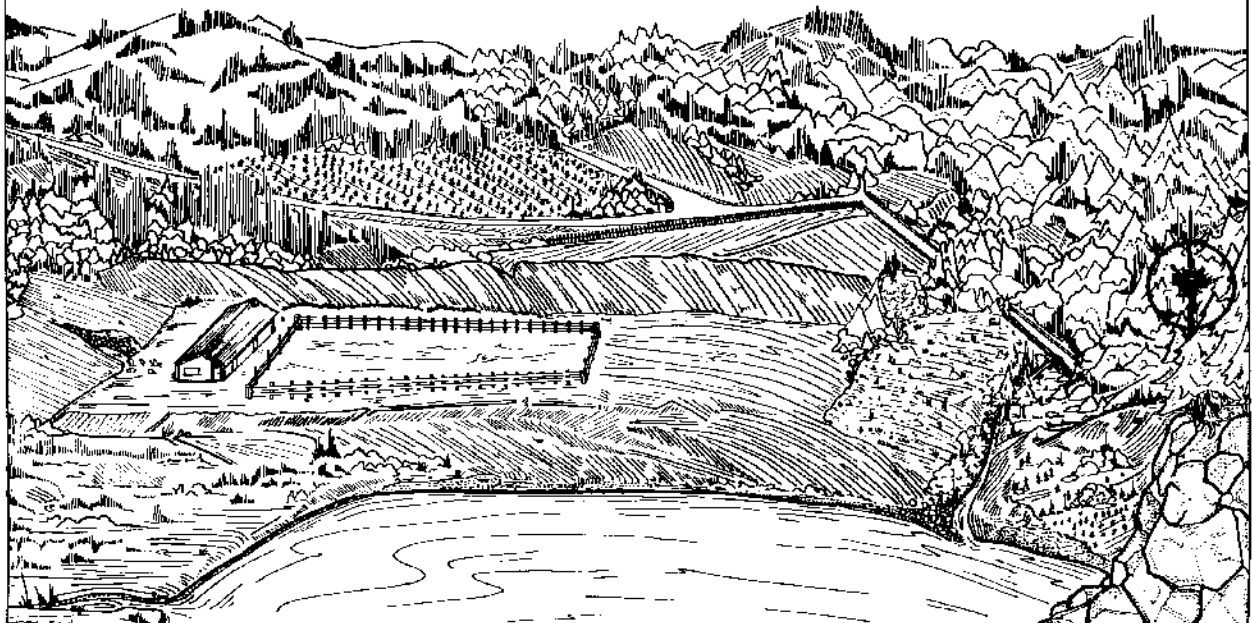
### Bald Eagle Oversight Committee

A special committee also has been provided through the new state regulations to help, in any way it can, facilitate an agreement on any particular site-management plan. This committee also serves as a barometer as to how well the management process is working; how good the cooperation is between participants. Formal appeals procedures are available as a last resort in disagreements over site management.

## NESTING SITES



## SITE MANAGEMENT





## Adjustment of Site-Management Plans

With time, bald eagle activity, habitat conditions, landowner objectives, and property owners themselves may change. Site management plans are designed to be flexible and can be re-evaluated and adjusted as any change occurs.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

We can manage bald eagle habitat by working together. The information you provide, the abilities and incentives for you to manage your land, whether it be for timber, recreation, housing or farming, and especially your interest and cooperation, will be the foundation to continue to have eagles and eagle habitat well into the future.

### Report Sightings

If you locate a bald eagle nest, or observe eagles at any time of year, report the sighting to the Department of Game's Nongame Program, 600 N. Capitol Way, Olympia, WA 98504-0091. (206) 586-1449.

### Winter Survey

Since 1979, hundreds of volunteers have assisted the Department of Game in counting Washington's wintering bald eagles. This high level of effort improves the estimate of the population, and helps us learn more about eagles' movements and habits in winter. Informed observers learn how to census and study the birds without disturbing them. If you'd like to participate in the annual January survey, contact the Nongame Program at the address above.

### Your Property

If you own property and know or suspect that bald eagles nest or winter on it, get started in designing a management plan by contacting the Regional Wildlife Biologist at the Department of Game regional office near you.

## Incentives for Landowners To Protect Eagle Habitat

The goal of the bald eagle regulations is to protect and enhance nesting and roosting habitat while respecting property rights of landowners. Because money for outright acquisition is (and will be) extremely limited, voluntary mechanisms and incentives to conserve eagle habitat are available.

One of the greatest incentives for landowners is the site planning process itself. Washington's regulations require on-the-ground, site-specific planning rather than arbitrarily setting protective circles around a nest. This flexible site planning more specifically addresses both the biological needs of the eagles and the financial and management needs of the landowners.

Other habitat conservation mechanisms available include conservation easements, long-term leases, and mutual covenants.

A conservation easement is a recorded deed that restricts certain uses of a piece of land. The easement binds the current and all future owners. The benefits to the landowner are two fold. Because use of land is restricted, property values and property taxes are reduced. In addition, the landowner may claim a charitable income tax deduction if the easement is donated to a public agency or private land trust. The amount of the deduction is the difference between the value of the land before and after restrictions are placed on the deed.

Leases allow a landowner to retain title to his property while being compensated for restricting the use of that land to protect eagles. Leasing, rather than buying the land, would minimize annual costs to the Department of Game. Leases have the additional benefit of not continuing in perpetuity (as with an easement), but only for the natural lifespan of a particular nesting or roosting site.

Mutual covenants are like conservation easements in that they restrict certain uses of the land for the benefit of eagles. They differ from easements in three major respects. They are enforced by the landowner or owners rather than by a conservation agency or organization. They are not as permanent as easements. And while covenants receive the same treatment as easements when property, estate and gift taxes are calculated, a landowner may not claim the imposition of a covenant restriction as a charitable income tax deduction.

These and other compensation mechanisms can assure protection of both eagles and landowners—at a minimum cost to the state and the landowner as well. A detailed listing and analysis of these voluntary processes is being prepared by Shirley Solomon of the Northwest Renewable Resources Center and Mike Yeager of the Washington Forest Protective Association. For more information, write to Solomon at NRRC, 710 Second Avenue, Seattle, WA 98104.

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*Authors of this special section were Bob Anderson, Weyerhaeuser Company Biologist; Jane Frost, San Juan County Planning Department; Kelly McAllister, Washington Department of Game Nongame Wildlife Biologist; Doug Pineo, Department of Ecology; and Pam Crocker-Davis, National Audubon Society.*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

### DEPARTMENT OF GAME OFFICES

#### Region One

*Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, Ferry, Lincoln, Pend  
Oreille, Spokane, Stevens, Walla Walla, and Whitman  
counties.*

North 8702 Division Street  
Spokane, WA 99218  
Telephone: (509) 456-4082

#### Region Two

*Adams, Franklin, Grant, Okanogan and Douglas  
counties*

1540 Alder Street N.W.  
Ephrata, WA 98823  
Telephone: (509) 754-4624

#### Region Three

*Kittitas, Yakima, Benton and Chelan counties*

2802 Fruitvale Blvd.  
Yakima, WA 98902  
Telephone: (509) 575-2740

#### Region Four

*Island, King, Pierce, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish and  
Whatcom counties*

16018 Mill Creek Blvd.  
Mill Creek, WA 98012  
Telephone: (206) 775-1311

#### Region Five

*Clark, Cowlitz, Lewis, Klickitat, Skamania and  
Wahkiakum counties*

5405 N.E. Hazel Dell Ave.  
Vancouver, WA 98665  
Telephone: (206) 696-6211

#### Region Six

*Clallam, Grays Harbor, that part of Pierce County on  
the Kitsap Peninsula, Jefferson, Kitsap, Mason and  
Thurston counties*

905 E. Heron  
Aberdeen, WA 98520  
Telephone: (206) 533-9335

Nongame Wildlife Program  
600 N. Capitol Way  
Olympia, WA 98504-0091  
Telephone: (206) 586-1449

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Endangered Species Program  
2625 Parkmont Lane SW, Bldg. B-2  
Olympia, WA 98502  
Telephone: (206) 753-9444

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Division of Law Enforcement  
121 107th Ave. NE, Suite 127  
Bellevue, WA 98004  
Telephone: (206) 442-5543

National Audubon Society  
Washington Office  
P.O. Box 462  
Olympia, WA 98507

Washington Forest Protection  
Association  
Evergreen Plaza Bldg.  
711 Capitol Way, Suite 608  
Olympia, WA 98501

County Planning Departments

Tribal Governments